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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002731

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, INR/B

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [MOPS](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE POLITICS: ONE WEEKEND AT A TIME...

REF: A. MANILA - EAP/PMBS 06-13-05 E-MAIL

[B](#). MANILA 2689

[C](#). MANILA 2626

[D](#). MANILA 2578

[E](#). MANILA 2142

[F](#). MANILA 2103

[G](#). MANILA 1452

Classified By: Political Officer Andrew McClearn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo survived the Independence Day weekend despite protests and calls for her ouster by members of the opposition. Privately, high-level Administration officials thanked the Charge for the USG's role in calming the waters; Charge reiterated that our goals were to support of rule of law and to ensure stability and the welfare of the Filipino people. Arroyo called for an end to "dirty politics" and "political intrigues" in public speeches, while her son, Congressman "Mikey" Arroyo, announced that he was taking a leave of absence due to allegations that he has profited from illegal gambling. Susan Roces, the widow of 2004 presidential candidate Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ), played a key role in calming tensions through her public remarks. The GRP appears to be readying to arrest former law enforcement official Samuel Ong, who publicly confessed to a role in wiretapping the president. Arroyo has taken some serious hits of late, which has likely undermined her ability to move forward with important reforms -- notably the adoption of strong anti-terrorism legislation with updated electronic surveillance provisions. She may resort to an early convening of a constituent assembly on Constitutional reform to break any Congressional logjam. Mission will continue to urge that Filipinos uphold the rule of law and focus on constructive approaches, and not become mired in a self-destructive downward spiral of accusation and counter-accusation. End Summary.

A Long Independence Day Weekend

[1](#)2. (C) President Arroyo -- amid scandalous accusations -- survived a long Independence Day weekend filled with public protests, intrigue, and calls for her ouster by members of the opposition. (Note: The opposition has accused Arroyo of complicity in electoral fraud based on recently released tapes and members of her family of profiting from illegal gambling -- refs C and D. End note) Elements of the opposition held an anti-government rally on June 11, which drew an estimated 3-5,000 people to a site in downtown Manila. The rally, which was sponsored by mainstream and leftist opponents, went off without a hitch or reported incidents or arrests. According to emboffs on the fringes of the rally, the crowd was good-natured and seemingly without a common platform -- apart from a shared dislike for Arroyo.

Officials Thank USG

[1](#)3. (C) Privately, high-level Administration officials thanked the Charge for the USG's role in calming the waters through our public calls for stability and opposition to extra-constitutional actions. Foreign Minister Alberto "Bert" Romulo voiced this view at a diplomatic reception held on June 11 at Malacanang Palace in honor of Independence Day, as did Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, who subsequently called the Charge. Ermita said Arroyo had asked him to call in order to express her "heartfelt appreciation." Charge noted to each that USG support was for the rule of law and its institutions as well as the process of democracy in the Philippines. He reiterated earlier public statements that neither side in this controversy should take extraordinary or extra-constitutional measures. The U.S. was focused on the welfare of the Filipino people, as that best advanced U.S. interests, Charge added.

Arroyo Calls for End to "Dirty Politics"

14. (SBU) Arroyo called for an end to "dirty politics" and "political intrigues" in separate public speeches marking Independence Day. In the June 11 address to diplomats, Arroyo called attacks on her "irresponsible madness" and accused her opponents of treating the country as "nothing more than a private sandbox for political intrigues." In a June 12 public address, Arroyo reiterated the theme, asking a crowd of some 5,000 "to condemn any kind of dirty politics and focus our attention to the development of our economy." The President also promised to rid the country of corruption by the end of her term in office (2010). Meanwhile, Vice President Noli De Castro, several prominent senators, and other high-level officials all issued public statements in support of the Arroyo administration over the long weekend. However, Arroyo's detractors dared her to come forward and confirm whether the voice on the tapes was indeed hers and, if so, to answer charges that she was engaged in electoral fraud (refs B-F). (Note: House and Senate leaders are looking into whether to hold hearings regarding the tapes. end note)

15. (SBU) As the public pressure ramped up, Mikey Arroyo announced on June 13 that he would take an "indefinite leave of absence" from Congress, clarifying that he would not participate in congressional business until he was cleared of jueteng profiteering. However, the 36 year-old Arroyo insisted that resignation was "out of the question," claiming he was innocent. Congressman Ignacio "Iggy" Arroyo, the president's brother-in-law, confirmed in a June 13 press conference that he was also considering a leave of absence, although he also claimed he had done nothing wrong. On June 8, President Arroyo had issued a public statement asserting the primacy of the rule-of-law over her family: "Nobody in my family or kin are above the law and no investigator or prosecutor could fear to uphold the law against them." In response to charges of a potential cover-up by Malacanang, the President authorized the Office of the Ombudsman to take over the Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation into the accusations that Mikey and Iggy were involved in profiting from jueteng.

FPJ's Widow Plays Key Role

16. (SBU) FPJ's widow Susan Roces played a key role in calming tensions. On June 11, after a long meeting with former National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) Deputy Director Samuel Ong, who had taken refuge at a Catholic seminary (see below), Roces emerged and told reporters that "We should not do a thing that would only add to our problems as a people. Any step we will take must be in accordance with the law." Observers from both sides praised Roces for her moderate stance and reassuring words. In live broadcast interviews, Roces insisted she had visited Ong to help ensure his security and calm everyone down. Roces said she did not support the call for President Arroyo to resign, and encouraged Filipinos to think before acting: "I am just here in cooperation with the desire of the government for peace and order. I am a law-abiding citizen, I encourage fellow Filipinos to be so." Roces -- whose petition to carry on FPJ's electoral protest was denied by the Supreme Court earlier this year (ref G) -- was also supportive of Ong. She suggested the audiotape be given a full airing before the Filipino people, asking "Is there anything wrong if we listen to this so we can find out if the one now in power was the real victor?"

GRP Plans to Arrest Former Official

17. (C) The GRP appears to be readying to arrest Ong, who publicly confessed to a role in allegedly wiretapping the president in a live TV press conference on June 10. Ong called on President Arroyo to resign her post, asserting that she had committed electoral fraud. Immediately after the press event, supporters rushed Ong to the San Carlos Seminary, where he sought refuge. Hundreds of security forces quickly surrounded the seminary, which is located along EDSA, the major Manila thoroughfare where the two successful "People's Power" movements began. Late on June 13, Ong left the seminary and traveled with several Catholic bishops to an undisclosed residence in the exclusive south Manila suburb of Ayala Alabang. According to media reports, the Department of Justice (DOJ) is considering filing a case against Ong for "Inciting to Sedition." Secretary of Justice Raul Gonzalez said the GRP would wait until a court issued the arrest warrant before it moved to apprehend Ong. Gonzalez admitted any move to arrest Ong would be a sensitive operation, given the intense media coverage of the situation. On June 13, opposition figure Ramon "Eki" Cardenas approached Emboff about the possibility of U.S. asylum for Ong. Mission informed Cardenas that this was not an appropriate case for consideration of asylum.

Comment

18. (C) President Arroyo has taken some serious hits of late, which has likely undermined her ability to move forward with important reforms. Perhaps most notable is the now diminished likelihood that the Congress might debate and approve anti-terrorism legislation that would include updated electronic monitoring provisions. Even additional steps in her economic reform agenda will be more difficult to push through a Congress seized with the public relations bonanza the recent scandals have provided the opposition. For her part, Arroyo has promised to focus on the big picture, underlining that her agenda will not be derailed due to all the heat she is taking. Some have speculated that she may in response to possible logjams in Congress move to speed up the convening of a constituent assembly to debate political reform and constitutional changes. Mission will continue to urge that Filipinos uphold the rule of law and focus on constructive approaches, and not become mired in a self-destructive downward spiral of accusation and counter-accusation.

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